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THE OLD OAK TREE



ONCE upon a time
there was an OLD
OAK TREE in a

gentleman's park. It grew beside a river, and stretched out its long strong arms, covered with thick green ivy, as if welcoming everybody to its shelter.

A number of animals took advantage of its invitations:

First, at the foot of it, lived Bunny the Rabbit, with Mrs. Bunny, his wife, and a fine family of sixteen children. There they ran in and out, cocking up their little white tails, and popping into their hole as quick as lightning the moment they saw anybody coming.

Jerry, the Squirrel, who lived high up in the tree, used to look down and pity Mr. Bunny very much ; for he was so

poor, had such a large family, and not a single nut laid by for the winter! But Bunny knew better; and when he, Mrs. Bunny, and the little gray Bunnies were huddled together so warm on a winter's night, he used to listen to the wind, and say, "Poor Jerry! how cold it must be up there!"

But Jerry could wrap his tail round his neck like a boa, and fall sound asleep on the tree-top.

Below Jerry's house, where the ivy was thickest, lived Cozie Cowl, the Owl, with his wise nose, and his great yellow staring eyes. He kept a singing-school at night, and when all the other birds were sleeping you might hear Cozie Cowl and the Misses Cozie Cowl all singing, "Tu-whit! Tu-who-o!"

Then, among the ivy was a Robin Redbreast, a pair of Blackbirds, and two lovely Tomtits; there was also a noisy family of Jackdaws, Mr. and Mrs. Ray by name, in a hole in the trunk, which they called "Heart of Oak Hall;" and, highest of all, lived a quiet old fisherman, called Longlegs, the Heron.

Most peaceably they all lived together, always polite and







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neighbourly. They sang their best songs; and the Squire used to look up and say,—“Ah! there is no tree so full of music as the OLD OAK.”

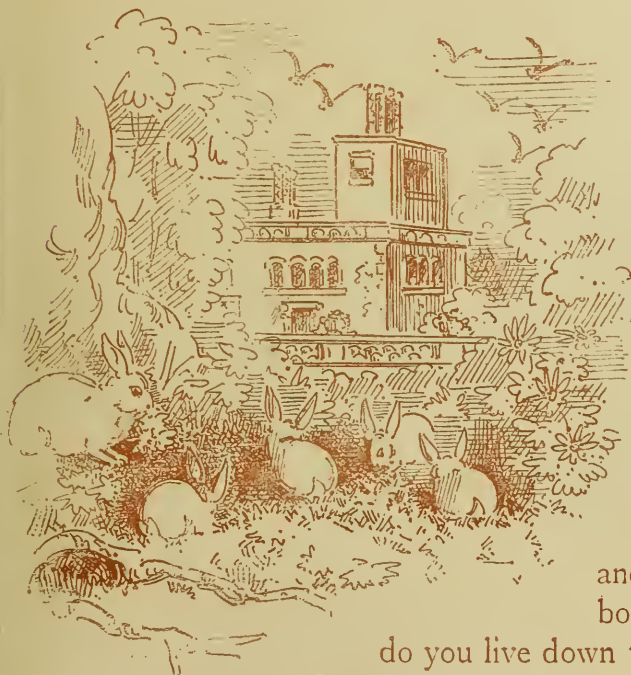
One day a pair of new-comers came to the Old Oak Tree, and began to settle themselves and build their nest. Mr. and

Mrs. Jay (for that was their name) were most beautiful birds, with crests on their heads and pretty blue feathers on their wings; but their voices were loud and sharp, and they seemed to be always scolding.

They were full of curiosity about their neighbours, and peeped into everybody's house. “Why

do you live down there, Mr. Bunny?” said Mrs. Jay; “I'm sure your house must be damp, and unhealthy for the children.

Then they attacked Cozie Cowl:—“If you would only keep decent hours, and come out the proper time of day, Mr. Cozie



Cowl, it would do you a world of good." And Cozie, with all his wisdom, was so silly as to believe them, and came tumbling out of his hole in the ivy, looking so foolish that the mischievous Jays laughed at him, and pecked at him till he crept into his corner again.

"As for you, Jerry," said Mrs. Jay, "I don't believe you are a bit comfortable up there. Why don't you marry Miss Hedgehog, and set up house decently?"



And so these two naughty birds made everybody uncomfortable, and taught those who had been contented before to despise their own houses and lonely life; till at last, instead of sweet songs, there was nothing but complaints and noises; and, loudest of all, the sharp harsh cries of Mr. and Mrs. Jay were heard from the tree.





One day, the Squire and his lady, with their children, came past: "What disagreeable noise is that? Oh, I see now, it is the Jays in that oak—what pretty birds!" "Very pretty, my dear," said her husband, "but insufferably noisy: we must get rid of them." And before night a gun went *bang!* and again *bang!* and down went Mr. Jay and Mrs. Jay, with all their fine feathers. And thus was peace restored to the OLD OAK.



About this time, Jerry, who was a great favourite with everybody, took to himself a nice little wife; and, in honour of the event, Mr. and Mrs. Cozie Cowl determined to give a grand tea party. It was difficult to fix upon a good hour, because, if it was during the daylight, Cozie Cowl would be sure to fall asleep, and if it was at night, no one else would be awake. So Mrs. Cozie, like a wise bird as she was, fixed on the twilight hour, when the moon would rise soon and serve them for a lamp.

What a nice feast she prepared for them! The best of nuts and acorns for Jerry and his wee wife, beautiful dandelions for the Bunny family, pretty speckled trout for Longlegs the Heron, grubs



and grains for the Jackdaws, and lovely fat worms for the Blackbird and Robin Redbreast; while for Cozie himself she got the very thing in the world he liked best—a particularly nasty dead mouse! Altogether there never was such a merry party in the OLD OAK TREE.

They sat a long time talking of many things, and at last they began to talk about their great neighbours in the big house hard by. “The Squire’s gardener is the best of men,” said Robin Redbreast; “he has been digging up worms for me since six o’clock this morning!” “But what do you think of



the lady herself?” said Bunny; “I heard her order him to fill the flower-beds with carnations, my own favourite food!” and the sixteen little Bunnies cocked up their long ears at the thought. “I know,” said the Blackbird, “the Squire’s cherries are the best in the country. I am so much obliged to him.” “Yes,” said the Jackdaw, “and the people who have put up the telegraph wires for us to sit upon!”

“My friends,” said Cozie, “you know nothing about it. I fly about by night, and know more than you do. I heard the gardener ordered to shoot the Blackbirds who ate the cherries; to set traps for the rabbits; and I heard my lady say she would like to have you, Jerry, my boy, running round the



treadmill in her Squirrel-cage! But as for the telegraph wires, *they* must have been put up for us to sit upon!" At this point Mrs. Cozie volunteered a song; on which all the birds said "Good-night" in a desperate hurry.

Now, the Jackdaws were not pleasant birds to have for neighbours. They were always grubbing and pecking in Heart of Oak Hall, till they made the hole too large to be good for the tree. Then the river that flowed beside it, worked away among its roots and loosened it; so one day, the Squire, as he came past, said, "That tree must be cut down."

Bunny, with his long ears, heard this, and ran directly to tell Jerry, who agreed with him that it was a great risk to remain; so did Blackbird and Robin.

The Water Rat recommended a nice clean lodging to the Bunnies.

Jerry and his wife betook themselves to the horse-chestnut tree; whilst Cozie Cowl and all the little Cozies just waited till it was dark enough for them to see, and then they too flew away to another shelter.

But the Jackdaws would not be warned.



“We have lived here always,” said they, “and we are not going away now. This tree has stood for hundreds of years, and it is likely to stand for a hundred more. You are always so easily frightened, poor Bunny. Such a tree was never cut down in this park, and never will be!”

But the Squire had given his orders, and the next morning the woodmen set to work to fell the Old Oak. The Jackdaws then began to think there might be some truth in Jerry's report; but when the woodmen went away to breakfast, and all was still again, they believed their own opinion once more, and went out as usual to find a dinner for their young family. Grubs were scarce that day, and it was late before they returned home, as they thought; but they had no home now. The ground was littered with splinters and broken branches. The Old Oak Tree was lying prostrate on the grass, and a few black feathers were floating down the river.



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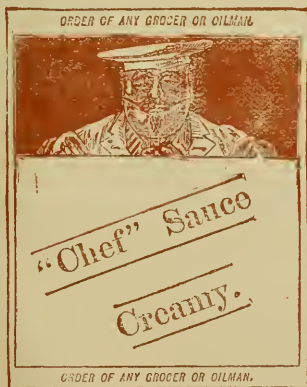
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